Special Issue on 2017 ISA RC55 Mid-term Conference

SENSHU UNIVERSITY

Happiness Research: Past and Future[1]

The Senshu Social Well-being Review
2017, No. 4, 65-73

http://ir.acc.senshu-u.ac.jp

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Abstract

Scholarly interest in happiness peaked in ancient Greek philosophy and during the 18th century Enlightenment. Interest in the subject revived in the second half of the 20th century and still mounts today. In this paper, I describe these trends of interest in happiness and speculate about the drivers of this development. On this basis, I make an educated guess about interest in the future.

Keywords

subjective well-being, life-satisfaction, social indicator, history of research, salience of the topic

As humans are conscious beings, they have always given thought about the quality of their lives. This thought became more systematic after the invention of scripture and the development of professional scholarship. Different notions of quality of life crystallized, often called by the same name of 'happiness'. A long-standing discussion emerged on the relative importance of these ideas, and on what constitutes 'true happiness'.

These views on the good life have been described at length in several books on the 'philosophy of happiness', such as recently in the monumental review by McMahon (2006) entitled 'Happiness: A history'. An overview of this literature is available in the 'Bibliography of Happiness' (Veenhoven 2017a, subject sections Ub and Uc).

These historical accounts compare schools of thought over time, typically beginning with ancient Greek philosophers, such as Aristotle and the Stoics, and ending with 20th century post-materialists. The focus is on the ideas as such, rather than on the social forces that shaped these. In this paper, I will follow a different approach. I focus on the quantity of research output and analyze the reasons for rise and decline in interest in the subject. I start with a classification of notions of happiness.

NOTIONS OF 'HAPPINESS'

The word *happiness* is used in various ways. In the widest sense, it is an umbrella term for all that is good. In this meaning, it is often used interchangeably with terms like *well-being* or *quality of life* and denotes both individual and social welfare. This use of words suggests that there is one ultimate good and disguises differences in interest between individuals and society. It further suggests that all merits can be integrated in one final scale of worth.

Quality-of-life concepts can be sorted using two distinctions, which together provide a fourfold matrix. I have proposed this classification in an earlier attempt to

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bring order to the many measures used in contemporary quality-of-life research (Veenhoven 2000). The first distinction is between chances and outcomes, that is, the difference between opportunities for a good life and the good life itself. A second difference is between outer and inner qualities of life, in other words between *external* and *internal* features. In the first case, the quality is in the environment, in the latter it is in the individual. Lane (1994) makes this distinction clear by distinguishing *quality of society* from *quality of persons*. The combination of these two dichotomies yields a fourfold matrix. This classification is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Four Qualities of Life

	Outer qualities	Inner qualities
Life chances	Livability of environment	Life-ability of the person
Life results	Usefulness of life	Satisfaction with life

Source: Veenhoven 2000

Livability of the Environment

The left top quadrant denotes the meaning of good living conditions, shortly called *livability*.

Ecologists see livability in the natural environment and describe it in terms of pollution, global warming and degradation of nature. Currently, they associate livability typically with preservation of the environment. City planners see livability in the built environment and associate it with such things as sewer systems, traffic jams and ghetto formation. Here the good life is seen as a fruit of human intervention. In the sociological view, society is central. Livability is associated with the quality of society as a whole and also with the position one has in society.

Life-ability of the Person

The right top quadrant denotes inner life-chances. That is: how well we are equipped to cope with the problems of life. Sen (1993) calls this quality of life variant *capability*. I prefer the simple term 'life-ability', which contrasts elegantly with *livability*.

The most common depiction of this quality of life is absence of functional defects. This is *health* in the limited sense, sometimes referred to as *negative health*. Next to absence of disease, one can consider excellence of function. This is referred to as *positive health* and associated with energy and resilience.

A further step is to evaluate capability in a developmental perspective and to include acquisition of new skills for living. This is commonly denoted by the term *self-actualization*. From this point of view a middle-aged man is not *well* if he behaves like an adolescent, even if he functions without problems at this level. Since abilities do not develop alongside idleness, this quality of life is close to *activity* in Aristotle's concept of 'eudemonia'.

Lastly, the term *art of living* denotes special life-abilities; in most contexts, this quality is distinguished from mental health and sometimes even attributed to slightly disturbed persons. Art of living is associated with refined tastes, an ability to enjoy life and an original style of life.

Utility of Life

The left bottom quadrant represents the notion that a good life must be good for something more than itself. This assumes some higher values. There is no current generic for these external outcomes of life. Gerson (1976: 795) refers to these effects as *transcendental* conceptions of quality of life. Another appellation is *meaning of life*, which then denotes *true* significance instead of mere subjective sense of meaning. I prefer the simpler *usefulness of life*, while

admitting that this label may also give rise to misunderstanding.

When evaluating the external effects of a life, one can consider its functionality for the environment. In this context, doctors stress how essential patients lives are to their intimates. At a higher level, quality of life is seen in contributions to society. Historians see quality in the addition an individual can make to human culture, and rate for example the lives of great inventors higher than those of anonymous peasants. Moralists see quality in the preservation of the moral order, and would deem the life of a saint to be better than that of a sinner. As an individual's life can have many environmental effects, the number of such utilities is almost infinite.

Apart from its functional utility, life is also judged on its moral or esthetic value. For instance, most of us would attribute more quality to the life of Florence Nightingale than to that of a drunk, even if it appeared in the end that her good works had some negative results.

Subjective Enjoyment of Life

Finally, the bottom right quadrant represents the inner outcomes of life. That is the quality in the eye of the beholder. As we deal with conscious humans, this quality boils down to subjective appreciation of life. This is commonly referred using terms such as *subjective wellbeing*, *life-satisfaction* and *happiness* in a limited sense of the word.

Humans are capable of evaluating their life in different ways. We have in common with all higher animals that we can appraise our situation affectively. We feel good or bad about particular things and our mood level signals overall adaptation. As in animals, these affective appraisals are automatic, but unlike other animals it is known that humans can reflect on this experience. We have an idea of how we have felt over the last year, while a cat does not. Humans can also judge life cognitively by comparing life as it is with notions of how it should be.

Most human evaluations are based on both sources of information, that is: intuitive affective appraisal and cognitively guided evaluation. The mix depends mainly on the object. Tangible things, such as our income, are typically evaluated by comparison; intangible matters, such as sexual attractiveness, are evaluated by how one feels. This dual evaluation system probably makes the human experiential repertoire richer than that of our fellow-creatures.

In evaluating our life, we typically summarize this rich experience in overall appraisals. For instance, we appreciate several domains of life. When asked how we feel about our work or our marriage, we will mostly have an opinion. Likewise, most people form ideas about separate qualities of their life, for instance, how challenging their life is and whether there is any meaning in it. Such judgments are made in different time-perspectives, in the past, the present and in the future. Mostly such judgments are not very salient in our consciousness. Now and then, they pop to mind spontaneously. Though not in the forefront of consciousness all the time, estimates of subjective enjoyment of life can be recalled and refreshed when needed. This makes these appraisals measurable in principle.

Such a subjective evaluation can also concern one's life as a whole. Bentham (1789) referred to such appraisal as 'the sum of pleasures and pains' and called it 'happiness'. In this paper, I call it 'life-satisfaction'[2].

PAST THOUGHT ON HAPPINESS

All above mentioned notions of the good life figure in classic thought, clearly because they are all of relevance in the human condition. Emphasis on particular notions has varied over time.

Earlier Focus on Moral Behavior

Virtue is central in much classic philosophy, probably because most philosophers made their living as moral advisors. In that context, personal capabilities such as honesty and faith are emphasized (right-top quadrant in

Table 1) and also manifestations of utility, such as martyrdom (left bottom quadrant). This emphasis on moral behavior seems to have been more pronounced in historical conditions where morality was at its weakest. Some classic philosophers have also given thought about what makes for a good society, such as Plato (380 BC) in his *Politeia* and in the writings of Confucius (Veenhoven and Guoquing 2008). This emphasis is typical for developed states and is therefore more prominent in contemporary nation states than it has ever been in the past. Today, all modern states monitor the quality of the living conditions they provide, using sophisticated systems of 'social indicators', which are becoming increasingly internationalized.

Moral philosophers were typically mixed about the worth of subjective enjoyment of life. Most accept it as a byproduct of living a good life, rather than a manifestation of the good life as such. One reason for this reservation is in their professional involvement with moral disciplining. Another reason is probably in the poor quality of life in agrarian societies, which appears in historically high rates of homicide, poor health, malnutrition, and consequently short lifev.

Modern Emphasis on Subjective Wellbeing

During the dark Middle Ages it was widely believed that happiness was not possible in earthly life and that the basis of morality was in the word of God. These views were contested in the 18th century 'Enlightenment'; happiness came to be seen as attainable and morality was regarded as man-made. A lively discussion on the relation between happiness and morality emerged (Mauzi 1960; Buijs; 2007) and in this climate an instrumental view on morality appeared, in which ethical codes are seen as ways of securing a happy life.

Much of this enlightened thought is reflected in Jeremy Bentham's (1789) 'Introduction to morals and legislation'. Bentham argues that the moral quality of action should be judged by its consequences on human happiness and in this line, he claims that we should aim at the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number'. Bentham defined happiness in terms of psychological experience, as 'the sum of pleasures and pains', that is, in the right bottom quadrant of table 1. His philosophy is known as 'utilitarianism', because of its emphasis on the utility of behavioral consequences.

RISE AND DECLINE IN SCHOLARLY INTEREST IN HAPPINESS

Though interest in happiness is found in all times, the topic has not always been equally prominent in the intellectual discourse. Happiness was a main subject in antiquity in western philosophy, but the topic is largely absent in medieval scholarly literature.

18th Century Philosophy

Happiness was 'rediscovered' during the 18th century European Enlightenment. This interest reflects in a growing number of publications on happiness in France and The Netherlands from 1670 onwards. See Figure 1, in which the number of book-titles using the word 'happiness' published between 1670 as 1830 is presented. Interest peaked around 1800 and then declined in the 19th century.

20th Century Social Science

Interest in happiness revived in the second half of the 20th century, not in the field of philosophy, but in the newly established social sciences. In the 1960's the topic appeared as a side-subject in research on successful aging (e.g. Neugarten et al. 1961) and mental health (e.g. Gurin et al. 1960). In the 1970's it became a topic in social indicators research and in the 1980s in medical quality of life research. Since 2000, happiness has become a main subject in 'Positive psychology' (e.g. Lyubomirski 2008) and in 'Happiness Economics' (e.g. Bruni et al. 2007). This all has resulted in a spectacular rise in the number of scholarly publication on life-

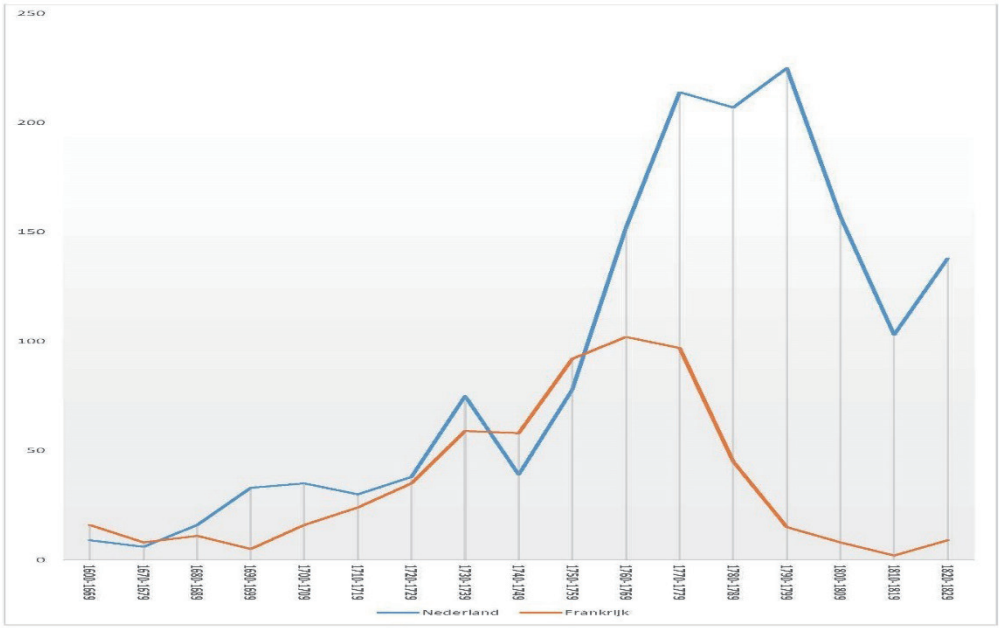

Figure 1. Books on Happiness in the Netherlands and France 1670-1830
Note: Upper line: The Netherlands, Lower line: France
Source: Buijs 2007

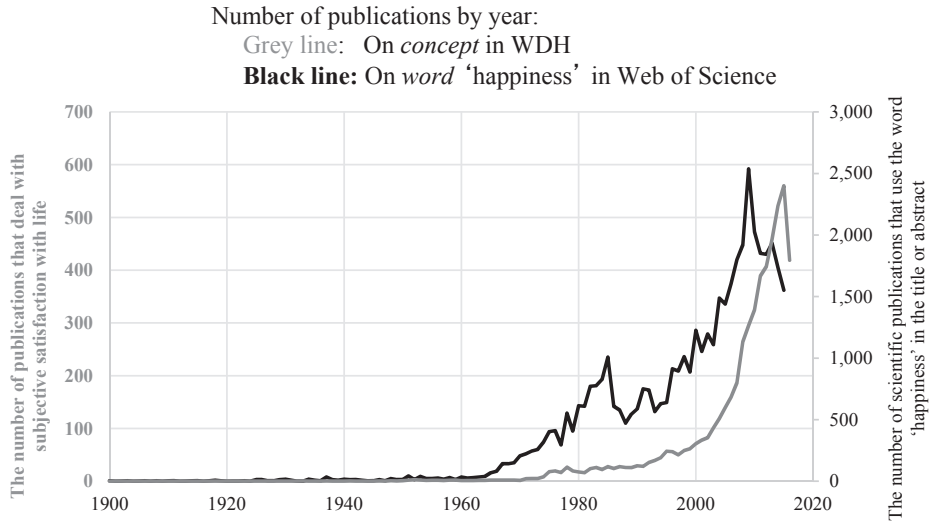

Figure 2. Scientific Publications on 'Happiness' since 1900
Sources: Bibliography of Happiness (Veenhoven 2017a) and Web of Science (Thompson Reuters)

satisfaction, see Figure 2. The black line in Figure 2 shows the number of scientific publications that use the word 'happiness' in the title or abstract, and covers all meanings of that word distinguished in Table 1. The grey line shows the number of publications that deal with subjective satisfaction with life, that is, the meaning denoted in the bottom-right quadrant of Table 1.

Why these changes in intellectual

concern about in happiness? Below I review some plausible drivers.

SOCIAL DRIVERS OF SCIENTIFIC INTEREST IN HAPPINESS

The intellectual agenda is typically not determined in the ivory tower alone, but also responds to societal demand. The following social conditions seem to have driven demand for information about happiness.

Quality of Life

Intellectual interest in the good life seems to be greatest in *good times* and in well-situated social strata; ancient Greek philosophers and Enlighted thinkers fit that pattern. One of the mechanisms is that in bad situations the way to a better life is pretty evident; escape suffering. This is at least one of the reasons why happiness was no great issue in mediaeval thought. Quality of life was at a historical low during that stage of societal development (Veenhoven 2010).

Likewise, questions on happiness were not the most urgent in the first half of the 20th century, when two world wars took place. Interest in happiness surged in the second half of the 20th century, an era characterized by prosperity and peace. Another mechanism is that good times make people realize that happiness is apparently possible during one's earthly life, and that it makes sense finding out how to get more of it. Interest in health has developed in a similar way, we now live longer in good health than ever before in human history but are also more concerned with health than ever before.

Ideology

Intellectual interest in happiness is also geared by the *ideological climate* of the time and by the place of competing topics on the political agenda. This is another reason why happiness was no topic in the highly religious middle ages when the church set the tone.

In this vein, one of the reasons for the decline of interest in happiness in the 19th century can be seen in the emancipation struggles of that era, in which liberals called for democracy and socialist for equality. Though both these movements rooted in Enlightened thought, emphasis on happiness would not strengthen their cause very much, since the conservatives could equally well claim that modernism would reduce happiness. Nationalism dominated in first half of the 20th century when the two world wars took place, and the nationalists were more interested in national glory than in individual happiness.

In this context, the revival of intellectual interest in happiness in the late 20th century can be linked to the fact that the above movements had largely reached their goals. The liberals had achieved democracy, the socialist had created a welfare state and the nationalist had turned global. This 'end of ideology' (Bell 1960) created room on the political agenda for quality of life issues, such as health and happiness, which created an information demand.

Planned Society

The current surge of interest in happiness is also driven by the information demands of several institutions in modern planned societies. Social engineers are particularly interested in objective information about livability issues, that is, the qualities of life denoted in the upper-left quadrant of Table 1. Social indicators research provides data to fill this information need. Strong institutions in the fields of education and health care also generate a constant demand for information about life-ability issues, denoted by the upper-right quadrant in Table 1.

Individual Freedom

At the individual level, a driver of scientific interest in happiness is increased *fate-control*. Thinking about the good life makes little sense if you cannot change your life. Ancient Greek city-states allowed their inhabitants considerable freedom, at least

for male higher-class citizens and this is one of the reasons why in that era the subject of happiness was prominent in the intellectual discourse.

Likewise, the emerging nation states of the18th century allowed the bourgeoisie unprecedented freedom and this is one of the reasons for the peak in books on happiness in this era, shown in Figure 1.

Freedom for all increased considerably in the second half of the 20th century, when the long-term trend to greater freedom accelerated and the present-day individualized multiple-choice-society took shape. This is one of the reasons behinds the upsurge of interest in happiness since the 1960s shown in Figure 2.

Informed Choice

A related driver is that the new opportunities to choose call for information on what to choose. For example, contraceptive techniques now allow couples to choose whether or not they will have children, and many want to know how a particular choice will work out on their happiness before making a binding decision. Hence the effect of having children on happiness is a common topic in the life-style press, which on its turn draw on scientific research.

This call for information about the consequences of choice concerns life-satisfaction in the first place, that is, the quality of life denoted in the bottom-right quadrant of Table 1. Though this information demand manifests in the first place at at the micro-level of individuals, interest in life-satisfaction is also rising at the at the meso level of organizations and the macro-level of nations, one of the reasons being that happy individuals function better in these contexts (Veenhoven 2015).

SCIENTIFIC DRIVERS OF THE PRESENT SURGE IN HAPPINESS RESEARCH

Scientific interest wanes in a subject, when no new knowledge can be obtained. This seems to have been the case with the subject of happiness in the 19th century. After a century of philosophical reflection on happiness, the subject got 'saturated'.

Empirical research gave rise to greater conceptual differentiation than armchair theorizing had done in the past, both because measurement pressed to greater precision and because findings revealed unexpected differences between aspects of the good life. For instance, the classic notion of 'wisdom' has crumbled into a set of rather loosely related traits (Bergsma and Ardelt 2012).

The new quality of life research has also augmented the growing interest in subjective appreciation of life, that is, in the quality of life denoted in the right bottom quadrant of Table 1. Life satisfaction appeared to be easily measurable in survey research, and in fact better measurable than most of the other qualities of life mentioned in scheme 1 (Veenhoven 2000). As a result, subjective happiness has become a more tangible topic; research shows how happy we are in this sense and also indicates how happy we can realistically be. Findings of this kind are well covered by the media, which has also augmented the rising prominence of subjective well-being in the public debate, this in its turn fuels scientific research.

FUTURE OF HAPPINESS RESEARCH

Will research on happiness continue to grow, or will interest in the subject decline, as it did in the 19th century? I foresee further growth of this research strand for the following reasons.

Social Drivers No Less Forceful

The social drivers mentioned above are still in force and are likely to remain in the future, if no unforeseen catastrophes happen.

Evident sources of unhappiness, such as epidemics and wars, have been removed, at least for the time being. Average happiness is high in modern nations and is rising steadily (Veenhoven 2010). This fosters confidence that greater happiness can be achieved but

at the same to time it becomes less evident how greater happiness can be achieved. An analogy with physical health may illustrate this point. Many evident sources of bad health are now under control, such as malnutrition, epidemics and unsafe workplaces. As a result, we live now longer in good health than ever before in human history. This progress makes us reach out for further gains in health, ways which are less evident and require more research, such as ways to treat of cancer and achive optimal nutrition.

I do not expect that happiness will fall into disgrace ideologically. The trend in value orientation is rather to more emphasis on modern post-material values (Inglehart 2008). I not expect either that freedom will decline and that demand for knowledge on happiness will therefore diminish. The trend is rather for greater opportunities to choose, paralleled by an increasing capacity to make well informed choices (Abdur-Rahman and Veenhoven 2017).

View on Scientific Progress

I do not expect that empirical research on happiness will reach a limit of understanding any time soon: I rather believe that we are at the beginning of discovery.

Though we are now well informed about some correlates of happiness (e.g. Veenhoven 2017), we are mostly still in the dark about the causal mechanisms behind these correlates. Does money buy happiness or does happiness foster earning? The diversity in research results is bending the initial search for general laws of happiness towards achieving a more fine-grained understanding of contingencies, such as in what conditions does money buy happiness for what kind of people.

New insights are also likely to be obtained using new techniques. Wearable electronic devices allow a much closer look at daily experiences of the individual than traditional questionnaires do and advances in brain research allow an ever better view on the genesis of affective experience and cognitive judgement of life. Likewise, advances in gene research promise a better understanding of the genetic basis of happiness.

CONCLUSION

Scientific attention for happiness has varied over the ages. Attention has surged recently and is likely to remain high in the near future.

Notes

1. Presentation at ISA-RC55 Mid-term conference, The Futures of Social Indicators**,** Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan, April 21-22, 2017. This paper draws on several of my earlier publications, in particular on Veenhoven 2000 and 2015.
2. In most of my work I use the word 'happiness' in the limited sense of 'life-satisfaction'. In this paper on historical trends, I use the word happiness in the broader meaning of 'quality of life' and denote all meanings in figure Table 1. I do so because 'happiness' was the keyword in philosophical literature through the ages.

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